



Collaborating for Mission: Regional Consultation Summary

‘God asks us to dare to create something new... It’s a task for all of us, to which each one of us is invited... We need a movement of people who know and need each other, who have a sense of responsibility to others and to the world. Let’s allow God’s words to Isaiah to speak to us: Come, let us talk this over. Let us dare to dream.’

Let us Dream: the path to a better future
POPE FRANCIS

The second series of our *Take the Way of the Gospel* regional forums took place over May and June 2023. This series explored how we might respond to Pope Francis’ call to be more missionary by collaborating within and across parish boundaries. The forum had both a short-term focus, that is, what parishes can implement immediately, as well as considering how the structure of the Archdiocese might be reconfigured to enhance our effectiveness in living and proclaiming the Gospel.

Pleasingly, in this series we saw an increase in attendance in nearly every region with a total of 279 people from 153 parishes (74%) across the Archdiocese participating.

The majority (84%) of participants enjoyed the experience, citing the benefits of [gathering](#)

with others in the Archdiocese, meeting people from neighbouring parishes and being able to share experience and ideas through open, practical, frank, focussed, meaningful and [productive discussion](#). Other highlights were the [opportunity for the parish team to work together, discovering their parish is well-placed to collaborate and identifying ideas to be more missionary](#). The opportunity to understand the vision of the Archdiocese, to think [strategically and discern the mission for the future](#) were also identified as being positive outcomes.

The range of participants and structure of the forum provided a [sense of synodality in action](#). The experience was [thought provoking, challenging but exciting](#). Providing an opportunity to dream a little led to participants [discovering shared fears and thoughts about change](#). The act of coming together also affirmed participants in their shared love for the Church and its future.

Suggestions for improvement from each of the forums were progressively adopted, resulting in small changes each time the forum was run. For example, a suggestion from the first forum led to neighbouring parishes being seated together at the same or nearby tables in subsequent forums, which led to more fruitful discussions and, in response to requests for more discussion time, the allocation of time for each of the group exercises was increased in the last two forums.

While these differences meant each forum was unique, this report draws together the themes that emerged about how we might start to collaborate more effectively.

Short term focus: What can parishes do right now?

The first exercise involved parishes identifying their foundations, opportunities, challenges and anxieties and sharing the most important issue for them in each of these areas. They then discerned concrete opportunities for collaboration by reflecting on where the Holy Spirit is leading them, what excites them about the potential collaboration(s), what they need to know more about and what worries they have.



Foundations

The elements that parishes could potentially build on included a strong faith community, good community spirit, a richness of cultures, active and enthusiastic parishioners, young, vibrant, large and/or multicultural communities, open-minded people, a willingness to engage, a committed and collaborative leadership team and the energy and vision of the parish priest.

Some parishes highlighted they have good structures in place to support collaboration, such as a united vision across the parish and the school or between partnered parishes, shared parish administration systems or strong lay ministries.

Some felt they had resources to grow, favourable demographics and/or financial security. Others identified a willingness to invest time and to have patience and persistence. Another recognised the fact that the parish has changed throughout its history put it in a good position for further change.

A few parishes shared they have already begun their journey to become more missionary, participating in leadership/team coaching or being two years into spiritual renewal. Others had started hospitality initiatives to strengthen their sense of community, such as a regular cuppa after Mass and the re-establishment of a social committee.



Opportunities

Reflecting the diversity of our Archdiocese, some parishes saw opportunity in their large Catholic base/network, favourable demographic changes, or the growth they are currently experiencing. Others saw opportunity in their multiculturalism and/or diversity, with one parish proposing ecumenical, educational and inter-racial dialogues were an opportunity to pursue.

There was a great desire to engage people and awaken their faith; to encourage people to become more active within the parish and to better engage with the school and school families. Evangelisation opportunities were identified, such as parish visitation, Alpha, catechist classes or focussing resources on groups such as youth.

Some parishes felt there was an opportunity to better recognise the charisms of their people, such as the formation of a Parish Pastoral Council, to grow local leadership or involve lay people in committees to bring deeper enrichment. Others identified opportunities for social and spiritual support to strengthen the parish community.

The most frequently cited opportunity was collaborating with neighbouring parishes and/or ministries, with suggestions such as developing teams across the three parishes, sharing resources and implementing more efficient administration.



Challenges

Low Mass attendance and the need for reconnection/engagement with parishioners, youth and young families, the school and school parents were frequently cited as challenges. At the other end of the spectrum was the difficulty in identifying regulars due to size and anonymity.

Another common challenge was unity or creating one community, for example creating unified activities with different cultural groups.

Some logistical constraints were also identified, such as a lack of finances, strong leadership, time, resources or people, and structural issues such as the distance between churches or neighbouring parishes in the countryside and no local Catholic secondary school.

Other parishes felt their major challenge was

disconnection through stretched pastoral responsibilities or proclaiming the Gospel with no resident priest. Succession planning for leadership was also seen as a challenge.

Attitudes such as inertia, fear of or resistance to change and an unwillingness by leaders to accept a need for change were also identified as challenges. Achieving buy-in from clergy and people, changing the mentality to a more collaborative model of leadership and willingness to explore the various forms of priesthood and ministry were also identified.

The lack of a coherent vision or culture were a challenge for some. For others, the tendency towards unhealthy competition was seen to be a major challenge.

Sociological factors, such as an increasingly secular society and an unwillingness to make faith a priority were identified. Some parishes found cultural factors challenging such as serving different ethnicities or serving a local community whose population is 40% Muslim.



Anxieties

Losing the parish identity was the most often cited anxiety. This was also expressed in concerns such as uncertainty about the future or a change in culture or leadership style. The loss of parish community or the ability to foster a sense of belonging across multiple locations were also cited.

Resource constraints also featured here, with anxieties about time poverty and lack of resources coupled with the burden of increased administration. There were concerns about where people with gifts and abilities would be found, and that the amount of work to be carried out may lead to burnout. Financial challenges such as managing declining thanksgiving programs, questioning long term viability and being able to afford to invest in people were also noted.

Some parishes said they are experiencing struggling groups, ageing communities, a generation gap, diminishing base, and/or historical issues. Other anxieties were the lack of commitment, apathy, itinerant parishioners and disconnection from Church.

Fear was also prevalent, with comments such as fear of stepping up and fear of failure as

well as concerns about being overwhelmed, losing control, going too fast or going too slow when managing change. Fear for survival or the closure of small parishes and schools were also highlighted.

Some of the difficulties of managing the change process were identified such as:

- Creating awareness of the need to change;
- Resolving differences of opinions in needs or priorities;
- Communicating and executing the new vision; and,
- Managing resistance to change, including engaging with people holding on to the past and older people who are feeling threatened by the change. Concern for older parishioners who had invested in the parish was also expressed.

Change fatigue was also evident in one of the comments provided: “Again?!”.

Being unsure who [to] collaborate with and concerns about children’s formation were also cited as anxieties.



Discerning opportunities for collaboration

While most parishes chose to take the worksheet related to this exercise home with them for further deliberation, a show of hands in the last three forums showed 32% of parishes plan to begin a new collaboration as a result of the forum attended.

In the worksheets left behind, one parish was drawn to ‘creating an environment to encounter Jesus’, another to ‘consolidation of foundations’ and another trusted ‘wherever the Spirit leads the Archbishop’. A desire to be more missionary beginning with their own parish community was also expressed. Likewise, another parish desired to go beyond their comfort zone and to places they had never been.

While others may not have identified a place to start, the importance of prayer and belief that the ‘Word of God fills people and quenches thirst’, and that ‘God works miracles and brings growth’, were important insights.

Next steps

When reading the report, it would be easy to think that some parishes have strong foundations and see great opportunities while others are bogged down with challenges and anxieties. In truth, the reality is much more complex.

Change is challenging. In general, we tend to be comfortable with the status quo and, as change generates uncertainty, ambiguity and unpredictability, some people will go to great lengths to avoid it. When change is thrust upon us, it is human nature to immediately feel a sense of loss at what we are being asked to give up. While some of us might soon begin to feel excitement at new possibilities, others will dread any change and resist doing anything differently for as long as possible. Each one of us has a different appetite and desire for change, and this is the reality in every parish community.

Sitting alongside these practical reactions to change is our belief that, by our baptism, we are pilgrims on a journey hoping to achieve our final destiny to be in communion with God for all of eternity. But we are more than a Church of pilgrims: We are a pilgrim Church that recognises it is not perfect and acknowledges there is a need for continual change and reform. Like the Israelites in their journey through the desert, we may falter but we are ultimately drawn back to the faith, trust and love that are at the heart of the everlasting covenant between ourselves and our God.

The local knowledge and insights gathered from parishes will assist in reconfiguring our Archdiocese to align with our current realities and anticipated future needs. While some dioceses have implemented change through a major operational reshaping of the parish landscape, we intend to take a more evolutionary road, moving towards larger centres of collaboration for Mission over time.

In some areas of the Archdiocese, the need for restructure is more urgent. For example, some parishes are no longer financially viable or have a very small and diminishing community, while in other areas, the need is less urgent

and therefore change will be able to occur more organically and incrementally. As well, as some priests retire and the available clergy diminishes, more parishes are likely to be partnered, sharing one parish priest. Other parishes that have been partnered for some years may also discern that amalgamation is now appropriate, as was the case earlier in the year with Reservoir and Reservoir East parishes and subsequently with Eltham and Montmorency.

Although additional work is needed to map the future configuration of parishes across the Archdiocese, a helpful image proposed is that the task is akin to that of creating a tapestry, and clarity about the future will ensure our day-by-day decisions are contributing to its overall creation.

While we are still at the beginning of our *Take the Way of the Gospel* journey, the pull of the Spirit to reorient our focus outwards and towards collaboration was palpable to many at the forums. The value of hearing each other's stories was also evident and highlighted the importance of honouring parish histories and identities. The conversations helped us to rediscover who we are as Church and to begin to explore to how we might embrace a new horizon of identity, beyond our geographic boundaries.

The need and desire for formation was identified repeatedly throughout the exercises. The theme for our third forum is "Forming for Mission", and we look forward to the opportunity to explore this topic further when we next come together.

Led by the Holy Spirit, we will walk together, learning as we go.



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